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# A Flemish Strategy to Combat Homelessness

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\ Abstract\_ In December 2016, the Flemish government approved an 'Integrated Plan Against Homelessness 2017-2019'. This regional action plan focuses on four strategic goals: (1) the prevention of evictions, (2) the prevention of youth homelessness, (3) the reduction of chronic homelessness, and (4) an integrated governance approach. In this contribution, a short overview of homelessness policies in Belgium and Flanders is provided and available indicators concerning the homeless population are presented. The actions proposed in the new plan are discussed and their strengths and weakness are analysed.

\ Keywords\_ Homeless strategy, Flanders, Belgium

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## Homelessness Policies in Belgium and Flanders

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Belgium is a federal state consisting of regions and communities. The first two state reforms which were enacted in 1970 and 1980 resulted in a complex state structure consisting of a federal level (responsible for social security, national defence, internal and external affairs, justice and most of health care), three Communities (based on language and responsible for culture, well-being, social services and education) and three Regions (responsible for economic and labour market issues as well as housing policies). The federal level is responsible for social security (apart from child benefits since the last reform in 2011), health care and justice.

Until 1993, a Belgian law dating back to 1891 prescribed that all "vagrants" who were sleeping rough or begging and who did not possess a basic sum of money were arrested and placed in 'colonies' in the rural periphery of the country. These institutions had an explicit moral function: homeless persons had to learn the

necessary social norms and values to behave properly in society. More specifically, they had to work to earn some money and to make a life outside the institution. However, even if they were released, most “vagrants” returned voluntarily to these institutions. By 1930, in Antwerp as in other European cities, charitable organisations for homeless persons were established, mainly providing night shelters (bed, bath, bread). This represents the start of a ‘freely accessible’ homelessness sector in Belgium. In 1968, a Belgian federation of residential centres was founded, as a consequence of the growth and the professionalization of this sector. At the end of the 1980s, critique of the law regulating vagrants surged, mainly as a result of a study into the living situation of homeless persons in the colonies (Neirinckx, 1989). As a consequence, in 1993, the law on vagrants was abolished and a new federal law mentioned for the first time ‘a homeless person’ who was defined as: ‘A person who does not have his own housing, who does not have the resources to provide this on his own and therefore is residing or staying temporarily in a home until housing is made available’.

As a consequence of various state reforms, a complex division of competencies is established in relation to homelessness. The federal state is still responsible for the law on the ‘Public Centres of Social Welfare’ (PCSW), which are present in each municipality and have the legal obligation to implement the right to social assistance to guarantee human dignity. The concrete interpretation of this right is decided at the local level by the board of the PCSW, consisting of local politicians. The PCSW can also supply night shelters and temporary transitional dwelling for homeless persons, but these are decided and mainly financed at the local level. The PCSW also implement general minimum income legislation (‘the right to social integration’), which guarantees a minimum income to every adult (from 18 to 65 years), who has insufficient means of existence and who shows willingness to work. The guaranteed minimum income is partially financed by the local community and partially by the federal government. If a former homeless person signs up to a personalised social integration project, the guaranteed minimum income is paid by the federal state for two years. The federal level is also responsible for health care and more specifically, mental health care and the organisation and financing of psychiatric hospitals.

The Communities are responsible for and finance social care services, such as youth care, social services for the disabled and the elderly and also the ‘General Centres of Social Welfare’ (CAW). These CAW are regional network organisations (as a result of different phases of scaling up local small initiatives often started as citizen initiatives), which offer different kinds of social services for specific psychosocial problems such as relational problems, domestic violence, and debt. Residential services, transitional housing services, crisis centres and day care centres for homeless persons are also part of the CAW. The main changes in the

homelessness sector in Flanders is the reversal in emphasis between residential services and transitional housing and the breakthrough of prevention. The total amount of beds in residential centres only increased from 1 553 in 2000 to 1 661 in 2010, while the transitional housing capacity increased from 970 persons and families in 2000 to 2 565 in 2010 (Vlaamse Woonraad, 2016). During the last 15 years, outreach services have also been developed to avoid evictions, mainly in the social housing sector. These services have a success ratio of 70%, but they only reach a small number of the total amount of those threatened by evictions (Lescrauwaet and Van Menxel, 2011).

The Regions are responsible for the main elements of housing policy. Historically, housing policies in Flanders mainly encouraged private ownership. In the private rental market, there is a lot of competition between tenants to find an affordable dwelling. In Belgium, approximately 10% of the total population and 27% of all tenants pay more than 40% of their income towards their housing costs. The social housing sector is relatively small (about 8%). Social housing companies are the largest actor (almost 150 000 dwellings) supplemented by social rental agencies, which offer 8 000 dwellings (Vlaamse Woonraad, 2016).

The allocation of social dwellings by social housing companies is complex and influenced by various criteria. Local municipalities can develop local regulations in which the allocation criteria are made explicit. Five percent of all allocations by social housing companies can be allocated more quickly and targeted to specific groups such as young care leavers, psychiatric hospital leavers or homeless persons. Social rental agencies (SRAs) are recognised and subsidised in each Belgian region, and are non-profit housing institutions that deal with the housing problems of poor and vulnerable people (De Decker, 2009). A SRA contacts a private landlord and offers to rent his or her property. In this way, the landlord gets an official tenant, which ensures the payment of rent and the practicalities of letting are transferred from the landlord to the SRA without any risk. SRAs choose the tenant, deal with any paperwork (including providing descriptions of the dwelling and registering the contract), organise collection of the rent, arrange fire insurance and organise repairs and maintenance. In exchange for agreeing to a lower rent, the landlord's revenue is guaranteed. The Flemish region created a housing benefit, but only for specific target groups or specific situations, such as persons and families leaving a dwelling that is inappropriate, uninhabitable or too small, homelessness or a relocation to a dwelling administered by the SRA.

In 2014, a cooperation agreement was signed by the federal state, the communities and the regions to coordinate policies of the different policy levels to prevent and to combat homelessness. This cooperation agreement used the ETHOS-definition as the guiding framework and consists of a description of all competencies of the

different policy actors and as such, it can be considered as the Belgian national action plan to combat homelessness. However, this agreement does not stipulate specific and measurable goals. It agrees to collect data and to coordinate the monitoring of homelessness policies. However, since signing the agreement, no specific implementation steps have been taken. Different policy actors have nevertheless launched new policy measures. The most innovative of these measures was the launch of Housing First in the five largest cities. In conclusion, during the last 15 years new policy measures at the federal and regional level were implemented, but in spite of different attempts a more coordinated approach or a national action plan consisting of measurable goals and specific actions and instruments failed to appear.

## Homelessness in Flanders

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In spite of the large battery of measures and initiatives to prevent and combat homelessness, the baseline measurement of homelessness in Flanders shows some significant policy shortcomings (Meys and Hermans, 2015). A count was executed in the whole of Flanders during two weeks in January 2014 to identify the total amount and profile characteristics of specific categories of ETHOS. More specifically, the study focused on the users of winter shelters, residential centres, transitional housing supplied by the PCSW and the CAW and persons who are threatened by eviction.

During the two-week period of this study, 711 adults and 53 children made use of winter shelters in the larger cities. On 593 occasions, individuals were refused access to a shelter (mainly because there were no beds available). Sixty percent of all users were situated in the two largest cities (Antwerp and Ghent). Eighty percent were male, 10% under 25 years old, 40% had no income and 17% were undocumented migrants. During the month before the count, these users stayed with friends, in squats, slept rough or stayed in a residential centre. Twenty percent were homeless for less than three months. There is probably an important 'dark number' concerning category 1 and 2 of ETHOS, given the lack of winter shelters in less urban areas.

Over the course of the study, 1 132 adults and 364 children stayed in residential centres. Half of the children were younger than 6 years old. Sixty-five percent were male, 20% under 25 years old, and only 10% had a job. The main triggers of their homelessness were relationship difficulties (30%), eviction (20%) or family conflict (15%). Forty percent has previously stayed in a residential centre, 29% stayed in a psychiatric institution before, 14% in a correctional institution and 13% in a youth care centre. Based on the responses of the social workers in these centres, for just

20% of users, a residential centre is the most appropriate form of help. The vast majority would be best helped in transitional housing or even independent housing. The lack of affordable housing is the main reason people remain in these centres.

During the study period, 1 127 adults and 732 children made use of transitional housing supplied by the CAW. Fifteen percent were in employment, 50% had previously stayed in a residential centre for the homeless, 30% had stayed in a psychiatric institution, and 20% in a youth care institution. According to the social workers, transitional housing is not the most appropriate form of help for 1 in 3, who are capable of living independently. 580 adults and 579 children made use of transitional housing supplied by the PCSW. Only 10% had previously stayed in a psychiatric institution.

The study also paid specific attention to eviction claims. Based on data from 179 of the 308 PCSW, we established that during those two weeks of January 2014, 599 eviction claims were sent to the PCSW (who have a legal obligation to undertake some action to avoid eviction). In 25% of the claims, children are involved. Eighty percent of the evictions are from the private rental market, however the outreach services mainly reach tenants in the social housing market. PCSW is informed about the eviction claim 2.5 months after it has been made, and in 60% of all claims cases the centres have not been aware of the situation of the threatened tenant.

About the same time, a qualitative study was conducted on the housing pathways and the experiences of persons leaving a psychiatric institution, a correctional institution or a youth care institution (De Decker et al., 2014). These qualitative interviews indicate how difficult the search for an affordable dwelling can be, the discrimination experienced in the private rental market and a social housing sector that makes the offer of a social dwelling conditional. For example, if the person in housing need does not agree to be supported by the CAW (to help them to 'learn to live independently'), they do not get access to the social dwelling.

Both studies illustrate some of the difficulties of exiting out of homeless services, the representation of previous users of residential services among the homeless, the structural problems of the housing market, the discrimination of vulnerable tenants, the large amount of children in the homelessness sector, the large amount of evictions claims (mainly on the private rental market) and the vulnerable situation of persons who have stayed in different kinds of care institutions. The new Flemish Integrated Plan Against Homelessness consists of different actions and goals to address these shortcomings.

## A Flemish Integrated Plan to Combat Homelessness

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At the end of 2016, the Flemish government approved an Integrated Plan Against Homelessness. This plan emerged for various reasons. First, during the last 10 years, the homelessness sector itself has called for a coordinated action plan. More specifically, Steunpunt Algemeen Welzijnswerk, an umbrella organisation of the homelessness sector, produced yearly reports on the numbers of users of services and brought into light the recent trends in the user population (such as the feminisation of the users, the increase of migrant users and institutional care leavers). This organisation was also an ardent supporter of the FEANTSA policy goals to end homelessness.

In the past, there were several political attempts to launch an action plan at the Flemish level, but it remained difficult to reach a consensus between the two Ministers (Housing and Well-being) and between the social care sector and the housing sector to reach an agreement on the goals and instruments of such a plan. Second, the baseline measurement brought into light specific problems, such as the relapse of users of residential services, the large extent of children in the homeless population and the need for more preventive measures. There was a lot of media attention for the study, and members of the Flemish parliament asked for a more coordinated approach to fight homelessness. Third, the Flemish housing council, which consists of all relevant housing actors, launched a report in May 2016 to encourage the Minister of Housing to launch a more coordinated approach.

Building explicitly on the five goals to combat homelessness as defined by FEANTSA, the Flemish action plan, a common initiative by the Minister of Health, Well-being and the Family and the Minister of Housing and Poverty Reduction, formulates four strategic goals: (1) the prevention of evictions, (2) the prevention of youth homelessness, (3) the reduction of chronic homelessness, and (4) an integrated governance policy approach.

Concerning the prevention of evictions, no specific goal is set. Although the preventive effects of housing subsidies are confirmed in the plan, no specific actions or future measures are described. Only better use of the current housing subsidies is mentioned. More attention is paid to persons and families threatened by evictions. For example, one action is to create a regional hotline where owners can signal problems with tenants. Another action is an evaluation of the juridical eviction procedure. A third action is that local advisory commissions that deal with payment problems concerning water and energy also strengthen the link with preventive outreach services. The most concrete action is the expansion of the capacity of outreach services to prevent evictions, paying specific attention to the private rental

market. The plan also aims to strengthen the cooperation between different social services for specific target groups (persons with disabilities, persons with mental health problems) who execute home visits.

The prevention of youth homelessness mainly focuses on young people who leave youth care. In the summer of 2016, the dramatic case of Jordy who died because of starvation in a public park in Ghent was a central topic in all national media. Jordy had stayed in a residential youth centre since he was a young child, left this centre when he turned 18, but didn't get the help he needed to survive. The main action of this part of the plan is to stimulate better cooperation between youth care services and social services for adults. For every 18 year old who leaves youth care, a roundtable between all relevant and related services will be organised to develop a support plan.

Concerning chronic homelessness, the two main actions that fit a housing-led approach are: (1) an increase of the accessibility of the housing market, and (2) more Housing First initiatives. Concerning the housing market, the Flemish government had already formulated general targets to increase the number of social dwellings by 2025. These ambitions are confirmed in this plan. In addition, the social rental agencies will be strengthened. Remarkably, the action plan also names discrimination as one of the causes of housing exclusion. To fight discrimination, a public system of loans to pay for the rental income guarantee will be developed and an action plan was announced. Also, the fast allocation of social dwellings for specific target groups such as homeless persons will be evaluated and experimental housing solutions will be stimulated (such as co-housing).

The action plan accentuates more Housing First initiatives, since the Housing First experiments in Belgium had very positive results: 90% of all homeless persons in Housing First projects still have their dwelling two years later. In addition, their health and self-image is significantly higher than users of residential services (Housing First Belgium, 2016). However, the actions mainly focus on support services and less on the availability of housing solutions. First, there will be a shift in emphasis from residential services to housing support services, which will be combined with housing solutions. In addition, new 'dedicated teams' will be developed, consisting of social workers of different social services (PCSW, CAW, mental health services and services for persons with disabilities), which will be responsible for an integrated approach in combination with a housing solution.

Concerning governance, the plan opts for a regional governance structure. Currently, nine regional networks of actors and municipalities are already working together to combat homelessness, but they do not cover the whole of Flanders. Other regional actors and municipalities will be encouraged to create similar networks. These regional networks have to develop a regional action plan to realise

the four strategic goals. They will develop their own programs, be responsible for monitoring and financial management, and make plans to prevent people having to sleep rough in the winter.

The action plan recognises that monitoring is an essential part of a successful approach and formulates four rather general indicators: (1) the total amount of evictions claims and realised evictions, (2) the total number of homeless persons, (3) the amount of families receiving outreach services and the success of these outreach services in terms of the avoidance of evictions, and (4) the users of housing benefits.

## Strengths and Weaknesses of the Plan

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This action plan has strengths and weaknesses. First, a common approach of the Ministers of Housing and Poverty Reduction and the Minister of Health and Well-being is an important signal, since in the past the relationship between the social service sector and the housing sector was always difficult. The action plan also chooses a housing-led approach, since a reform of residential centres is proposed, though without a fixed date as is the case for instance in Finland. However, this housing-led approach is emphasised less for young persons than for chronic homelessness.

This action plan also recognizes discrimination in the housing market as an important obstacle to homeless persons finding suitable housing. At the same time, no concrete action to combat discrimination is formulated, although a recent study financed by the City of Ghent and based on the methodology of 'practice tests' (Van der Bracht et al., 2015) shows that a third of owners discriminate against persons with a non-Flemish name and more than half discriminate against persons with a social security benefit. During parliamentary debates concerning this study, the right-wing New Flemish Alliance, the largest political party of the current government, has been an outspoken opponent of specific measures such as mystery calls and practice tests to detect discriminating owners.

The governance structure is also an important innovation, which makes tailor-made solutions possible. Supralocal networks will be established, mainly around the 13 larger cities in Flanders. These networks will be responsible for the implementation of the goals and they are also responsible for the monitoring of these goals. At the same time, the composition of the network is decided on the supralocal level. This means that necessary partners such as mental health services or youth care services can opt to not join the network. Especially since care leavers are an important risk group, a more enforceable measure is necessary to make them part of these networks. In addition, psychiatric hospitals are not financed by the regional



level, which makes it even more difficult for these networks to convince them to join. Until recently, compared to other countries, Belgium had one of the highest numbers of psychiatric beds. In 2011, a reform of the mental health sector was launched by the federal Minister of Public Health. Its central idea is to substitute institutional care by floating support. However, the social care sector is rather critical of this reform, because the new floating support teams or mobile teams are not sufficiently accessible for the most vulnerable groups such as the homeless.

Despite its strengths, the 2016 plan is not that ambitious. There are no clear and measurable goals and a lot of actions remain rather vague. A common monitoring system has not yet been developed. The baseline measurement study is already four years old and in the meantime no new homelessness data has been collected. This means that there is no valid and reliable information concerning the different ETHOS categories.

Concerning youth homelessness, the focus is rather limited to care leavers, although international research shows that welfare state retrenchment is a growing cause of youth homelessness (see for instance Benjaminsen, 2016). No specific evidence in Flanders is available, but more and more young people are applying for a guaranteed minimum income (one in three applicants are younger than 25 years), youth unemployment is high in the larger cities (up to 25%) and rules for unemployment benefits have become stricter and more conditional during the last five years.

An important success factor will be the availability of affordable housing. As stated in the plan, the Flemish government has never invested as much in social housing as during this period, but also waiting lists for a social dwelling have never been as long (more than 100 000 families are waiting for a social dwelling), resulting in harsh competition between vulnerable groups to gain social housing. There are no formal commitments in the action plan to allocate more social dwellings to homeless persons although the plan calls for a more accessible housing market.

Lastly, although the plan chooses Housing First as a solution for chronic homelessness, there is no formal financial commitment yet to expand these projects. In addition, it is not clear if housing will be unconditional or coupled to social support offered by a team. The Minister of Housing and Poverty Reduction has indicated in the Flemish parliament that she is in favour of Housing First but that it has to be coupled by social support.

## Conclusion

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The Belgian and Flemish policy approach to homelessness is incremental rather than ground-breaking. In the last 15 years, various policy measures have been launched to fight against homelessness (such as the growth of social rental agencies, the improvement of the accessibility of the social housing sector, new preventive actions to avoid evictions, the Housing First experiment), but a more coordinated approach was rather missing, despite a cooperation agreement by all policy actors signed in 2014. In December 2016, a Flemish Integrated Plan Against Homelessness based on a housing-led approach was launched. The plan recognises that prevention and the availability and accessibility of housing are key ingredients to diminish homelessness, but remains rather vague concerning the specific actions to ameliorate the current housing crisis (more than 100 000 persons and families are waiting for a social dwelling). In addition, the complex division of competencies between the federal, regional and local authorities concerning homelessness impedes a coordinated approach. This new action plan will not solve institutional problems, but chooses a more bottom-up approach. While this makes a tailor-made approach possible, at the same time it fails to give answers to those cities or regions that are not convinced to develop new policies and actions. A uniform and common monitoring strategy combined with a data collection strategy is a necessary condition to improve the likelihood of success of the plan, but is missing at the moment.

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